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## Has Los Angeles, now flush with arts, finally found its heart?

The Broad Museum for contemporary art opened in downtown Los Angeles this weekend, adding to a flourishing of culture in the city's once-barren downtown. A fresh sense of civic identity is emerging, but slowly.

By Gloria Goodale, Staff writer | SEPTEMBER 21, 2015

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LOS ANGELES — When New York artist Stacie Chaiken moved to Los Angeles 19 years ago, she thought she ought to live downtown. Coming from the urban density of Manhattan, she figured that's where the heart of the city would be.

She couldn't have been more wrong in her reckoning, she says. After a brief trip to the downtown area, she realized she was afraid even to walk the streets in the daytime, let alone live there.

But now, as she stands in the shadow of the newly opened Broad Museum on the Grand Avenue arts corridor, just uphill from the city's civic center, that has changed. Now she lives nearby in a renovated historic building, and she has even given up her car because she no longer needs it to live, work, and play in L.A.

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Her transformation from a doubter to a believer in the heart of this city, which is better known for its suburban sprawl than a vibrant city core, is a rough parable of central L.A.'s own emergence. The downtown area has tried to become a hub before, and it will take time to gauge the success of this latest effort. But there are some promising signs, such as a healthy residential occupancy rate — Ms. Chaiken included.

At this point, it's probably unrealistic to expect downtown L.A. to become the sole focal point of the region. Indeed, the area will not necessarily shed its profile as having multiple centers, says California historian Kevin Starr. Rather, he says, the downtown is emerging as its own addition.



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"Greater Los Angeles will never cease to be a metropolitan region with fourteen or more downtown-like densities; but the downtown with a capital D has survived this diversification and is now rebuilding itself as an equal partner" to places like Santa Monica in terms of population and cultural activity, writes Dr. Starr in an e-mail.



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Many cultural additions have contributed to drawing attention to downtown: Staples Center/L.A. Live, Walt Disney Concert Hall, the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, the Colburn School for performing arts, the Music Center, the Grand Park, and now the Broad Museum. The attractions are adjacent to the civic center and City Hall, which Starr notes is the largest governmental complex outside Washington.

"Los Angeles will remain its distinctive kind of place — diverse in [the ways and places it chooses to be dense], but with a recognizable Downtown in the mix," adds Starr, who teaches at the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles.

L.A. may be no different from other newer cities in having a relatively underwhelming downtown, says urban historian Joel Kotkin, who teaches at Chapman University in Orange County. In Los Angeles's case, the city has been trying to create a vibrant downtown for a half century — "arguably at the expense of the rest of the city," he writes in an e-mail.

The growth of the downtown is largely cultural and residential, he says, not job-related. The area accounts for barely 3 percent of all regional employment, while the comparable figure for New York and Washington is 20 percent, according to the historian.

Professor Kotkin also isn't convinced that downtown L.A. is distinctive when compared with other parts of the city. "It is really just one node in a city of many nodes and that won't change," he writes.

For her part, Chaiken awakened to the possibilities of downtown slowly. She was lured back after marrying a journalist who worked there. "We bought nine years ago at the top of the market," she says, then proceeded to live through the 2008 market collapse. "Now prices are back where they were, sky-high and climbing," she adds.

According to the 2014 annual report of the Downtown Center Business Improvement District, the 65-block area now has a residential occupancy rate of 95 percent, with 7,408 units under construction and 14,058 in the pipeline. Numerous foreign investments include at least two, billion-dollar Chinese-funded multiuse developments that are under way.

Already, the population is triple what it was two decades ago.

If the grand opening Sunday of the Broad Museum is any indication, the growing number of attractions is having an effect. Hundreds lined up in triple-digit heat to see the personal collection of contemporary art assembled by Eli and Edythe Broad over the past 60 years.

L.A. may never have the concentration of culture that a New York or Paris has, but the changes are drawing praise from Angelenos.

"New York is more concentrated with more people close together," says Richard Adlem, CEO of a fish company from Hollywood. He and his wife attended the opening of the museum and were headed out to eat in the area before leaving.

"We just don't have that same kind of neighborhood here. It's full of more wide-open spaces," he says, but he also notes that he has seen a huge change in the 20 years that he's been going to the downtown Los Angeles Athletic Club. "Lots more buildings, lots of new nice ones in the place of crummy old ones," he says, adding, "It's really great to have someplace else to go down here."

In addition, the focus on contemporary art is pulling in a younger demographic than the symphony and opera tend to attract. And the Broads decided to keep admission free to attract a wide range of audiences.

College student Travis Lees says he drove the nearly 90 minutes from Victorville, where he goes to school and works at the local Domino's. He says he and his friends are used to coming downtown to skateboard the streets. But now, he says, he has a new reason to head downtown. "I wanted to see my favorite artist, Jean-Michel Basquiat," he says.

Still, the escalating gentrification of downtown has its downside, Chaiken says as she heads for something to eat after her visit to the museum. "The people on Skid Row are getting pressured as the big developers look for more areas to build," she says, shaking her head. And she doubts that families will be heading downtown to live anytime soon. "There are no schools or good public transportation to serve their needs," she says.

She also notes that real estate speculation is pricing artists out of the marketplace. "Most of them can't afford to buy into the Arts District anymore," she says.

She is happy to have a thriving nightlife, with more cafes and restaurants, but she also worries about the impact of so much construction. "If we are careless, downtown could lose a lot of values that have defined it in the past," she says.

The current boom has limitations, agrees Kotkin of Chapman University. He says that roughly 50,000 people live in the city's heart — equivalent to an L.A. suburban area such as Sherman Oaks.

The timing of the boom is also a bit curious. It comes, Kotkin says, as the larger city is in the midst of a two- to three-decade-long decline. "So a little gentrified downtown (foreigners, hipsters, USC students) is occurring as the city itself is having a rough time." ■

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